

## Baden aquarium designer a big fish in the industry

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By ROSE SIMONE, RECORD STAFF

**BADEN** - As Stace Bleich was growing up, he often tended the four or five colourful aquariums in his house that were kept as a hobby by his father.

He didn't realize it then, but the knowledge he was gaining would eventually become the basis of a thriving business.

Bleich runs Aquariums by Design Inc., a Baden-based business, operated from his home, that sells, designs and installs aquariums and bird aviaries, and also services, maintains and moves them.

When he started the business on a part-time basis in 1997, he was working as a manager at the Aquarium Services store in Kitchener.

The store sold aquariums and aquarium products, but there were customers who also wanted their tanks cleaned and maintained. Bleich figured he could earn some extra cash by providing that service.

"I didn't even know if it was going to be a legitimate business, but I kept getting more clients," he says.

Finally, four years ago, he and his wife Jaime, who does the books for the business, decided there were enough customers to turn Aquariums by Design into a full-time enterprise.

Today, the company is still providing maintenance, but also does sales, design and installation.

The company has five people on staff, plus a cabinet maker on contract who makes cabinets for custom built aquariums.

Each maintenance staff member has a "route" to provide weekly and bi-weekly cleaning and maintenance for fish tanks and bird aviaries across a wide swath of southern Ontario.

Bleich tries to maximize the number of stops on the routes as much as possible.

"For a while, we were driving to Orillia for one client, and so we were losing money doing that. But within about six months, we were able to fill in the route, and now, it is one of our busiest routes," he says.



Many aquarium businesses fail soon after they start and Bleich sometimes inherits customers from those businesses. But he gets most of his new customers through referrals from existing clients.

Bleich says 80 per cent of the work is for businesses and institutions, including doctor's and dentist's offices, athletic centres, retirement homes and hospitals. He also services large free-standing or in-wall aquariums in private homes.

His company maintains tanks of all sizes, from one that holds less than six gallons of water, up to a spectacular 10-foot long "built-in" wall tank that holds 600 gallons of water.

In the United States, many hotels, restaurants and shopping centres have huge aquariums. For example, the Aquarium Silverton Hotel in Las Vegas has a 117,000-gallon saltwater aquarium. Bleich hopes that idea catches on in Canada. "I would love to take the business more into those high-end systems," he says.

In dental offices, aquariums help to calm waiting patients, Bleich says. His wife, Jaime, adds that at retirement homes, where many residents can't get outside, "this is bringing the outdoors in to them."

After Bleich bought the customer list of a Stratford business that was tending to aquariums and aviaries, his business branched into building environments for birds as well as fish.

"Up until then I had not done aviaries, but there were 30 aviaries in these retirement homes that also had fish tanks. So we started researching the birds." He and Jaime now have a "bird room" at home, where they breed canaries and finches for the aviaries.

In September, the Bleichs will move into a larger house being built in Baden, in order to have more space for the growing business and its fish and bird displays.

When Bleich first started working in aquarium stores, he thought he would do it for a couple of years and then move on. But he stayed with it and now is pleased to have a business that "is growing really well."

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